

## **Overview of the Merikins Project**

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**Premiere of the Merikins**

**March 21, 2012**

**At Digicel Imax Theatre, Port of Spain**

### **(AS PREPARED)**

The United States of America and the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago share a long and deep history of cultural and commercial ties that stretch back nearly 300 years, before either of us an independent nation.

But, more significantly than those impersonal facts, our two countries are joined by people's lives.

This year is a milestone in our shared history as the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago is celebrating fifty years of independence, democracy and freedom.

This is a good time to look at one of the communities that link the United States and Trinidad and Tobago – The Merikins.

When I first learned about the Merikins... When I heard how freed slaves fought in the War of 1812 and then built a new life in what was then unsettled wilderness in southern Trinidad.... My first thought was "This sounds like a movie, does Steven Spielberg know about this?"

Well as you will soon see, Steven Spielberg certainly should. It is a story of struggle and heroism that can inspire us all.

Over the next few months we worked with the Canadian and UK High Commissions, JCD & Associates, historians, librarians and - most importantly - members of the community, to set up interviews, visit sites and find the pictures, paintings and artifacts that help to tell their epic story.

The enthusiasm we found was as deep as it was contagious.

I remember calling one member of the community and he said the Merikins had waited 200 years for this phone call!

Well we could hardly disappoint them.

We knew it would be no easy task since the story of the Merikins spans four countries and has to be reassembled from scarce records and an oral history.

To assemble the first film history of the Merikins, JCD filmed interview subjects for hours and then compared their statements, often calling to follow up and ensure that what you see on film tonight is as accurate and complete as we could make it.

Over the last few months we heard some incredible stories, more than could possibly be captured in a short film.

But I believe that tonight's film is not the end of this effort to tell the Merikin's story, but the beginning.

With 2012 marking the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the War of 1812 and the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, there are quite a few projects underway to tell this tale.

You will be hearing from the Merikins in the weeks and months to come. Their story will no longer be forgotten.